

Death by Suburb sermon series
#6 – Service: Volunteer of the Year
Oct. 28, 2007
Kory Wilcoxson

I have a new business concept that I want to share with you. You can tell me if you think it's any good or not. The idea is for a gas station, but it's not like any gas station you've ever seen. When you pull up to the pump, instead of getting out of your car, a person comes from inside the gas station, asks you how much gas you want, and pumps your gas for you. I think I'll call them "attendants." Not only will they pump your gas, but they'll also wash your windshield and even check your oil if you want, all while you wait inside the comfort of your vehicle. Isn't that a novel concept?

Of course it's not. Once upon a time, all gas stations operated that way. I can still remember pulling into gas stations in my hometown and choosing between the two islands: full-service and self-service. When's the last time you saw a full-service gas station? Nowadays, *everything* is self-service, from gas stations to banks to grocery stores.

But when held up to the biblical understanding of how we are to relate to each other, the concept of self-service is an oxymoron. In the Bible, "to serve" automatically implies an outward orientation toward another person. But in the suburbs, service tends to flow back to us, even when it appears to be oriented to someone else. You could argue that all service in the suburbs is self-service.

Let me give you an example, and I hope I don't step on any toes here. In the past few years, I've had several parents and youth in our church ask me to sign forms that said the youth had done a certain amount of community service. I guess there's now a requirement in local schools that students must complete a certain amount of work in the community. And certainly, colleges are putting more and more emphasis on a young person's philanthropic involvement in the community.

Here's another example. This church used to have something called the Cross-Eyed Owl award. It was given at each birthday dinner to a person in the congregation who had gone above and beyond the call of duty in serving CCC. Each year someone was singled out for their contribution to the church and awarded the Cross-Eyed Owl statue.

Now, in both these examples, I don't want anyone to think for a minute that I'm questioning the worthiness of the work or the worker. The more we can have people helping, the better. And people like to feel appreciated for the work they do. I'm not saying that Cross-Eyed Owl winners only served for the award or high school students only serve to meet a requirement. But what I want us to explore this morning is the motivation behind why we serve.

Why do we serve? That question first assumes that we do serve. I would like to think that is true of all Christians, but I can't tell you how many people have told me they enjoy going to big churches because they can be anonymous, just sit in the pews without being asked to do anything. They're just too busy with all their other suburban obligations to help out at the church. Jesus said he came not to be served but to serve, but I wonder if at times we don't come to church with just the opposite way of thinking.

For those of us who do serve, I would argue that for many of us, it's out of desire to make a difference. That's one of the main reasons why I got into ministry. We want

our lives to have meaning. That's the whole point behind "The Purpose-Driven Life," isn't it? We serve so that we have a purpose, so that we feel like we're doing something to give back and help out.

Is there anything wrong with that? Yes and no. No, because we all want to feel like our lives mean something. That's human nature. But what's potentially wrong with that approach to serving is that if we are serving in order to make ourselves feel better, we are engaging in self-service, and the people being helped are just a means to the end of our own self-fulfillment.

In his book "Death by Suburb," David Goetz tells about how he volunteered for a ministry program that helped inmates transition back into the world after their incarceration. He was paired with a prisoner named Pete, who was close to his parole. Goetz met repeatedly with Pete, working with him to help smooth the difficult transition from prison to a local halfway house. Goetz said he had big dreams for Pete that included Pete marrying his girlfriend, buying a house, and settling down in suburbia.

So imagine Goetz's anger when he found out that Pete had been arrested again after only a few months out of jail. Goetz said he was furious, because Pete had jeopardized all of Goetz's plans for him. Goetz was using Pete in his pursuit of significance. He wanted to help a poor person become a suburbanite just like him. Forget that maybe that's not what Pete wanted or needed.

In our performance-oriented suburban culture, we expect results from everything, even our service. If we're going to put in the time or the money, we expect change. Last year while we were in New Orleans for our mission trip, some of us visited the house we had worked on the previous year. And it hadn't been touched in all that time. I was furious! How could we put in all that time and effort, only to have the house look exactly the same? I was expecting to walk up a flower lined path, through a neatly mowed yard, to knock on a freshly painted door and be greeted by a smiling, grateful woman with a plate of chocolate chip cookies. Never mind that there were thousands of other houses that had never been worked on. I wanted my house to be different. What's the point in helping others if we're not going to see some results?

But service can be messy, and doesn't always end the way we want. That's why Goetz says we often find ourselves mostly serving in safe or comfortable programs, where we won't get dirty or no relationship with someone in deep need will form. There are people who need friends, who need money, who need guidance because they are in such deep poverty or despair. But why get involved in that? There's no upside for us.

If we can't get results from our service, then at least we should get some recognition. I think in the suburbs we often confuse prominence with significance. We think the more prominent a service is, the more important it must be. How can our lives make a difference if no one sees us making a difference? I don't think we consciously scream "Look at me!" when we're serving, but it's human nature to want to be appreciated.

But if you've spent any time serving in a church, you know not all the ways we serve are going to be glamorous. Not every ministry we participate in will be recognized and applauded. But there's a difference between prominence and significance. My nose is prominent, but I can live without it. And although my lungs aren't prominent, I'd say they're pretty significant. Some ways of serving are more visible than others, but that doesn't mean they are more meaningful than others.

The challenge for us in suburbia is to make the move from self-service to full-service, where our focus is on serving others, and then to God-service, where our reason for serving is not prominence or even importance, but obedience. Goetz says, "Finding our purpose comes not from the results of service but the act of obedience. No matter what the call...inner freedom comes as I pursue truth, justice, and righteousness without needing to be seen as right or needing to see the results I want." In other words we serve because we have been served, and are called to do the same.

Pastor David Shirey tells a story he heard about the building of the National Cathedral in Washington DC. One of the foremen on the construction crew noticed that a certain stonemason was spending a lot of time on one of the gargoyles that would adorn the very top of the cathedral. Knowing they were falling behind schedule, the foreman said to the stonemason, "Why are you spending so much time on this gargoyle? Don't you know that it's going to be so high up that it won't even be visible to the people below?" And the stonemason replied, "I'm not doing this for the people below."

What we are called to do may benefit the people here below – the kids in Sunday School, the homeless coming to St. Bart's for a meal, our neighbors and friends – but our ultimate motivation isn't to do it for the people below – including ourselves – but in response to God's gift of Jesus Christ and the call to share that gift.

It all comes back to that relationship. Eric Sandras says that many of us are lured into being busy for God, while sacrificing true relationship with Him. A week full of service opportunities will never take the place of an hour spent with God. It is that hour, that time, that relationship that helps us understand why we do everything else we do. Not for ourselves. Not even for others. But for God. We are here not to be served, but to serve